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Many express ignorance of Iran operation's details

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WASHINGTON — Calls by members of Congress for President Reagan and his top aides to make a full accounting of his Iranian arms initiative may go unanswered for a time because senior levels of the Reagan administration seem to be in the dark on many of the details.

The latest indication of an information gap within the administration occurred yesterday when the No. 2 man at the State Department, John C. Whitehead, told the House Foreign Affairs Committee that the department did not yet know precisely what had happened.

"We in the State Department still do not have a detailed record of what happened," said Mr. Whitehead, the deputy secretary of state, in an unusual admission.

Moreover, Donald T. Regan, the White House chief of staff, also seemed to be saying that important information was not readily available, telling reporters on his arrival at the White House yesterday morning, "I think there should be a thorough study of exactly what happened and then, based upon that, a discussion of what we should do in getting our initiative started again with Iran."

In addition, CIA Director William J. Casey told congressional intelligence committees Friday that he personally and the CIA as an institution had not been fully informed of everything that happened regarding diplomatic contacts with Iran, administration sources said yesterday.

The sources, who were briefed afterward by participants, said Mr. Casey told the panels that no one agency was involved from start to finish, except perhaps a small group within the president's National Security Council staff.

Sens. David Durenberger, R-Minn., and Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., chairman and vice chairman respectively of the Select Committee on Intelligence, complained about lack of

information in a letter to the president last Friday. In the letter, they questioned the decision to deny information on the operation to key members of Congress.

Following meetings that day with Mr. Casey and Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, the president's national security adviser, the senators wrote, "While many questions regarding the facts in the case have been answered, both Mr. Casey and Mr. Poindexter are themselves still engaged in piecing together the full record of this operation."

Commenting yesterday on Friday's meeting, a Senate intelligence committee spokesman, Dave Holliday, said, "The one thing that surprised everyone was that there didn't appear to be any single person who had all of the facts."

Mr. Holliday said that judgment, which he described as "almost a universal feeling" among panel members, was based on secret testimony before the committee by Mr. Casey, as well as on an earlier briefing of some of its members by Admiral Poindexter at the White House.

Officials close to the situation have said in recent days that the staff of the NSC, the lead agency in implementing the policy decided upon by the president, was still trying to reconstruct some of the details of the high-level contacts with Iran over the past 18 months.

A member of the NSC staff explained the reconstruction yesterday in newspaper terms. "It is rather like saying, 'Tell me how The Baltimore Sun of June 26, 1985, was put together,'" he said. "It's possible, but when the paper was being put together, people were worried about putting the paper together and not setting themselves up to reconstruct the process a year and a half later."

"So what we have to do is get people to go through their files, go through their memories, and that takes time," said the official, who spoke on the condition he not be named.

But the official also said that the major actions of the past 18 months were known, if not all the "operational details." Asked what was still unclear, he replied, "Who said what to whom, when, where, for example."

Especially sketchy, informed sources said, were details of the evolution of the Iranian contacts during most of 1985, when Robert C. McFarlane was national security adviser and was the key figure in developing the policy.

"We don't have the benefit of McFarlane's piece of the puzzle from the spring of '85 until December '85," said one White House official, who spoke on the condition that he not be named. "This was a concept. Until we got this fully off the ground, it was merely a series of conversations between McFarlane and various senior people [of various nations as well as in the White House] in various places."

The Justice Department is known to be looking into details of the operation, and Lt. Col. Oliver North, a key NSC operative, was reportedly at the department over the weekend.

Asked about the purpose of that visit, White House spokesman Larry M. Speakes said, "It would be my guess that the Justice Department was probably in a process of reconstructing the events of 1985...."

Mr. McFarlane resigned his post last Dec. 4, but he served as a special envoy for the president to so-called moderates in Iran in May of this year, arriving in the capital of Tehran on a plane carrying military supplies.

The first full-scale discussion within the administration of the Iranian situation occurred last Dec. 6. A similar meeting took place Jan. 7 that resulted 10 days later in the president's signing an intelligence "finding" authorizing the arms shipments.

Before that, however, Mr. McFarlane reportedly had a series of meetings with various potential intermediaries about the prospect of establishing contacts with the revolutionary Iranian regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.